

# RESPONSIBLE SOURCING



## Production process

SHEEP

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### Animal welfare considerations

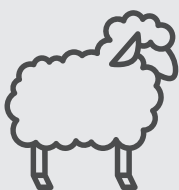
- Extended time in feedlots
  - Husbandry procedures such as castration, tail docking and mulesing (or other breech modification) without pain management
  - Live export
  - Long distance transport
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### Definitions

**Lamb** – sheep who is under 12 months of age or does not have any permanent incisor teeth in wear.

**Ewe** – adult female breeding sheep.

**Ram** – adult uncastrated male breeding sheep.



Sheep are quiet, gregarious and curious animals. They are one of the earliest domesticated animals and likely descend from wild mouflon in Europe and Asia. As a prey animal they have excellent peripheral vision and can see behind themselves without turning their heads. A sheep's natural lifespan can be up to 12 years, however if raised for meat, e.g. lamb, their lifespan is only 6–8 months.

The vast majority of sheep farmed in Australia are raised in extensive pasture-based systems. Before going to slaughter sheep may be finished or 'fattened up' in a feedlot for a period (around 30 days), where they are fed a grain-based ration. Sheep can be housed in feedlots during poor seasonal conditions to feed animals and ensure they reach market weight, or for a time prior to being slaughtered to ensure they meet market requirements. If lamb or mutton is labelled as 'grass-fed' then they have not spent any time in a feedlot. Feedlots are a potential cause for concern as movement may be restricted and animals may be exposed to extremes of heat or cold. Indoor feedlots present a stressful environment for sheep and some serious welfare issues including insufficient space, inadequate flooring, and no opportunity for sheep to graze, exercise, or rest comfortably.

Ewes can be mated (joined) with rams from 7 months of age, this is mostly done naturally by introducing suitable rams to the herd in paddock. Once there has been successful conception, a ewe's gestation (pregnancy) lasts around 145 days. Lambing occurs in paddocks with sheep exposed to the elements if appropriate shelter, e.g. trees and shrubs, is not provided. Lambs will stay with their mothers and suckle from them until they are weaned at around 14 weeks of age.

Sheep raised for meat may be subjected to painful procedures i.e. castration and tail docking, without the use of anaesthetics or pain relief. Breeding ewes and rams in sheep meat production systems may be subject to mulesing, the painful removal of skin from the tail and backside of the sheep using shears, to reduce the risk of flystrike. Lambs destined for slaughter may also be mulesed although this is not necessary as flystrike risk for these young animals is low. These procedures are usually carried out during lamb 'marking' when the lamb is between 6–10 weeks of age.

Once weaned, the 'weaner' lambs are raised in paddocks away from their mothers. Careful management of feed intake is required post weaning to ensure mortality rates are kept low. Most feed is provided by pasture, but if the availability or quality is poor then supplementary feed may be provided.

Weaners will continue to be raised until they reach the desired market weight. This depends on market demands, however any sheep slaughtered between 4–12 months of age (or with no permanent incisor teeth in wear) is considered 'lamb' and 'mutton' comes from sheep older than a year (or with permanent incisor teeth in wear) .

Once they've reached slaughter weight, sheep are transported to an abattoir, either directly or via a saleyard. Transport is inherently stressful for farm animals as they are exposed to unfamiliar conditions, handling, people, and other animals, so it is better to transport animals directly to their destination. Saleyards are stressful for the same reason and it is not uncommon to see sheep crammed into saleyard pens with little room to move. Animals are without water during the transport process and legally may be off water for up to 48 hours. At the abattoir, good handling and effective stunning to ensure the animal is unconscious prior to bleeding out are paramount to humane slaughter. Sheep are stunned using either electrical or percussive/mechanical methods.

**For more information visit the RSPCA's Knowledgebase [kb.rspca.org.au](https://kb.rspca.org.au)**